

Special Report

Army reservist witnesses war crimes New revelations about racism in the military

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April 1, 2005—Aiden Delgado, an Army Reservist in the 320th Military Police Company, served in Iraq from April 1, 2003 through April 1, 2004. After spending six months in Nasiriyah in Southern Iraq, he spent six months helping to run the now-infamous Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad. The handsome 23-year-old mechanic was a witness to widespread, almost daily, U.S. war crimes in Iraq. His story contains new revelations about ongoing brutality at Abu Ghraib, information yet to be reported in national media.

I first met Delgado in a classroom at Acalanes High School in Lafayette, California, where he presented a slide show on the atrocities that he himself observed in Southern and Northern Iraq. Delgado acknowledged that the U.S. military did some good things in Iraq. “We deposed Saddam, built some schools and hospitals,” he said. But he focused his testimony on the breakdown of moral order within the U.S. military, a pattern of violence and terror that exceeds the bounds of what is legally and morally permissible in time of war.

Delgado says he observed mutilation of the dead, trophy photos of dead Iraqis, mass roundups of innocent noncombatants, positioning of prisoners in the line of fire—all violations of the Geneva conventions. His own buddies—decent, Christian men, as he describes them—shot unarmed prisoners.

In one government class for seniors, Delgado presented graphic images, his own photos of a soldier playing with a skull, the charred remains of children, kids riddled with bullets, a soldier from his unit scooping out the brains of a prisoner. Some students were squeamish, like myself, and turned their heads. Others rubbed tears from their eyes. But at the end of the question period, many expressed appreciation for opening a subject that is almost taboo. “If you are old enough to go to war,” Delgado said, “you are old enough to know what really goes on.” It is a rare moment when American students, who play video war games more than baseball, are exposed to the realities of occupation. Delgado does not name names. Nor does he want to denigrate soldiers or undermine morale. He seeks to be a conscience for the military, and he wants Americans to take ownership of the war in all its tragic totality.

Aiden Delgado did not grow up in the United States. His father was a U.S. diplomat. Aiden lived in Thailand and Senegal, West Africa. He spent seven years in Cairo, Egypt, where he became fluent in Arabic and developed a deep appreciation of Arab culture.

On September 11, 2001, completely unaware of the day’s fateful events, Delgado enlisted in the Army, expecting to serve two days a month in the Reserves. When he turned on the television, he realized instantly that his whole world had changed.

After he joined the Army, Delgado began to read the Sutras. He became a Buddhist, a vegetarian, and eventually became a Conscientious Objector. Delgado was honorably discharged when he returned home. Delgado earned four service medals which, he says, are standard awards. He faced criticism from the Army when he began to speak out about military conduct in Iraq. Don Schwartz, spokesman for the Army in Washington, D.C., said that Delgado should have reported any wrongdoing to Army personnel.

“He should have reported first to his boss, his commander. That is the standard way the chain of command works.”

When I interviewed Delgado recently, he expressed his deep love of his country, but he also insisted that racism—a major impetus to violence in American history—is driving the occupation, infecting the entire military operation in Iraq.

Delgado’s testimony tends to confirm the message of Chris Hedges, The New York Times war correspondent who wrote prior to the invasion of Iraq: “War forms its own culture. It distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it. . . . War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us. Even as war gives meaning to sterile lives, it also promotes killers and racists.” Here is Aiden Delgado story.

Q: When did you begin to turn against the military and the war?

DELGADO: From the very earliest time I was in Iraq, I began to see ugly strains of racism among our troops—anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiments.

Q: What are some examples?

DELGADO: There was a Master Sergeant. A Master Sergeant is one of the highest enlisted ranks. He whipped this group of Iraqi children with a steel Humvee antenna. He just lashed them with it because they were crowding around, bothering him, and he was tired of talking. Another time, a Marine, a Lance Corporal—a big guy about six-foot-two—planted a boot on a kid’s chest, when a kid came up to him and asked him for a soda. The First Sergeant said, “That won’t be necessary Lance Corporal.” And that was the end of that. It was a matter of routine for guys in my unit to drive by in a Humvee and shatter bottles over Iraqis heads as they went by. And these were guys I considered friends. And I told them: “What the hell are you doing? What does that accomplish?” One said back: “I hate being here. I hate looking at them. I hate being surrounded by all these Hajjis.”

Q: They refer to Iraqis as “Hajjis”?

DELGADO: “Hajji” is the new slur, the new ethnic slur for Arabs and Muslims. It is used extensively in the military. The Arabic word refers to one who has gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca. But it is used in the military with the same kind of connotation as “gook,” “Charlie,” or the n-word. Official Army documents now use it in reference to Iraqis or Arabs. It’s real common. There was really a thick aura of racism.

Q: Were there any significant incidents besides racial slurs and casual violence against civilians?

DELGADO: The last mission I ran in the South before we were redeployed North was strange. I was told to drive way out into the desert, off the road. When we got there, we found Kuwaitis excavating a mass grave site (from the Saddam era). Kuwaiti engineers wanted to identify and repatriate the remains. It was a solemn affair. I was with the First Sergeant. he said: “Give me that skull. I want to hold the skull in my hands.” He picked up the skull, tossing it to himself. Then he turned to me and said: “Take my picture.” It was taken while he was standing by a mass grave. This was a very surreal, dark time for me in Iraq. It was tough for me to see brutality coming out of my own unit. I had lived in the Middle East. I had Egyptian friends. I spent nearly a decade in Cairo. I spoke Arabic, and I was versed in Arab culture and Islamic dress. Most of the guys in my unit were in complete culture shock most of the time. They saw the Iraqis as enemies. They lived in a state of fear. I found the Iraqis enormously friendly as a whole. One time I was walking through Nasiriyah with an armful of money, nadirs that were exchanged for dollars. I was able to walk 300 meters to my convoy—a U.S. soldier walking alone with money. And I thought: I am safer here in Iraq than in the States. I never felt threatened from people in the South.

Q: What happened when you moved North, before you reached Abu Ghraib?

DELGADO: We were a company of 141 Military Police. We gave combat support, followed behind units to take and hold prisoners. I was a mechanic. I fixed Humvees. We followed behind the Third Infantry division. It was heavily mechanized with lots of tanks and scout vehicles. We could trace their path by all the burned-out vehicles and devastation they left behind. The Third pretty much annihilated the Iraqi forces. Iraqis did not have much of an organized military. They had civilian vehicles, and they resisted pretty valiantly, given how much we outclassed them. The Third Infantry slaughtered them wholesale. We took so many prisoners, we couldn't carry them all. Large numbers of civilians were caught in the crossfire.

Q: How were the civilians killed?

DELGADO: It was common practice to set up blockades. The Third Infantry would block off a road. In advance of the assault, civilians would flee the city in a panic. As they approached us, someone would yell: "Stop, stop!" In English. Of course they couldn't understand. Their cars were blown up with cannons, or crushed with tanks. Killing noncombatants at checkpoints happened routinely, not only with the Third Infantry, but the First Marines. And it is still going on today. If you check last week's MSNBC, they dug out a father and mother and her six children. We were constantly getting reports of vehicles that were destroyed (with people in them) at checkpoints.

Q: Your unit, the 320th Military Police, was stationed at Abu Ghraib for six months. Who were the prisoners at Abu Ghraib? Where did they come from? Do you have any new information not yet reported in the media?

DELGADO: There were 4,000 to 6,000 prisoners at Abu Ghraib. I got to work with a lot of officers, so I got to see the paperwork. I found out that a lot of prisoners were imprisoned for no crime at all. They were not insurgents. Some were inside for petty theft or drunkenness. But the majority—over 60 percent—were not imprisoned for crimes committed against the coalition.

Q: How did so many noncombatants get imprisoned?

DELGADO: Every time our base came under attack, we sent out teams to sweep up all men between the ages of 17 and 50. There were random sweeps. The paperwork to get them out of prison took six months or a year. It was hellish inside. A lot of completely innocent civilians were in prison camp for no offense. It sounds completely outrageous. But look at the 2005 Department of Defense Report, where it talks about prisoners.

Q: When you arrived at Abu Ghraib, what did you see, beyond what we all learned from the scandal in the news? And how were you affected?

DELGADO: I was becoming disillusioned. I expected brutality from the enemy. That was a given. But to see brutality from our own side, that was really tough for me. It was hard to see the army fall so much in my esteem. The prisoners were housed outside in tents, 60 to 80 prisoners per tent. It rained a lot. The detainees lived in the mud. It was freezing cold outside, and the prisoners had no cold-weather clothing. Our soldiers lived inside in cells, with four walls that protected us from the bombardment. The Military Police used the cold weather to control the prisoners. If there was an infraction, detainees would be removed from their tents. Next, their blankets were confiscated. Then even their clothing was taken away. Almost naked, in underwear, the POWs would huddle together on a platform outside to keep warm. There was overcrowding, and almost everyone got TB. Eighteen members of our unit who worked closely with the prisoners got TB, too. The food was rotten and prisoners got dysentery. The unsanitary conditions, the debris and muck everywhere, the overcrowding in cold weather, led to disease, an epidemic, pandemic conditions. The attitude of the guards was brutal. To them Iraqis were the scum of the earth. Detainees were beaten within inches of their life.

Q: Were any detainees killed?

DELGADO: More than 50 prisoners were killed.

Q: What happened?

DELGADO: The enemy around Baghdad randomly shelled our base. Under the Geneva Conventions, an occupying power cannot place protected persons in areas exposed to the hazards of war. More than 50 detainees were killed because they were housed outside in tents, directly in the line of fire, with no protection, nowhere to run. They were hemmed in by barbed wire. They were trapped, and they had to sit and wait and hope they would survive. I know what it was like because a single mortar round would flatten a whole line of tires on the Humvees, a whole line of windshields. That's how I thought about the damage because I was the mechanic who had to replace the windshields. So the mortar bombardments killed and wounded many prisoners.

Q: So your commanders knowingly kept your prisoners in the line of fire? How many U.S. soldiers were killed during the shellings?

DELGADO: There were two U.S. soldiers killed during my stay.

Q: Were there any other incidents?

DELGADO: The worst incident that I was privy to was in late November. The prisoners were protesting nightly because of their living conditions. They protested the cold, the lack of clothing, the rotting food that was causing dysentery. And they wanted cigarettes. They tore up pieces of clothing, made banners and signs. One demonstration became intense and got unruly. The prisoners picked up stones, pieces of wood, and threw them at the guards. One of my buddies got hit in the face. He got a bloody nose. But he wasn't hurt. The guards asked permission to use lethal force. They got it. They opened fire on the prisoners with the machine guns. They shot twelve and killed three. I know because I talked to the guy who did the killing. He showed me these grisly photographs, and he bragged about the results. "Oh," he said, "I shot this guy in the face. See, his head is split open." He talked like the Terminator. "I shot this guy in the groin, he took three days to bleed to death." I was shocked. This was the nicest guy you would ever want to meet. He was a family man, a really courteous guy, a devout Christian. I was stunned and said to him: "You shot an unarmed man behind barbed wire for throwing a stone." He said, "Well, I knelt down. I said a prayer, stood up and gunned them all down." There was a complete disconnect between what he had done and his own morality.

Q: Commanders permitted use of lethal force against unarmed detainees. What was their response to the carnage?

DELGADO: Our Command took the grisly photos and posted them up in the headquarters. It was a big, macho thing for our company to shoot more prisoners than any other unit.

Q: When did all this happen?

DELGADO: November 24th. The event was actually mentioned in the Taguba Report, under Protocol Golden Spike. And there's more. Before our company transported the bodies, the soldiers stopped and posed with the bodies and mutilated them further. I got photos from the guy who was there, my friend. I have a photo of a member of my unit scooping out the prisoner's brains with an MRE [meals-ready-to-eat] spoon. Four people are looking on; two are taking photographs. If you remember the Abu Ghraib stuff that came out on CNN, this kind of stuff was common. You see guys posing with bodies, or toying with corpses. It was a real common thing in the military, all because the guys thought Arabs are terrorists, the scum of the earth. Anything we do to them is all right.

Q: So far as I know, no commanders have been held accountable for events at Abu Ghraib. Your story implicates commanders in ongoing brutality. In one of your presentations, you said: "Our command definitely knew about the prisoners being shot. They posted the photos in their headquarters. They knew all about prisoners being beaten." Did your commanders try to prevent information from reaching the public?

DELGADO: After the Abu Ghraib scandal broke on CNN and TV, commanders came out to us and said: "We are all family here. We don't wash our dirty linen in public. This story doesn't need to go on CNN. Nobody needs to find out about this." There was a sort of informal gag order.

Q: You enlisted in the Army Reserve in good faith. Now you are a conscientious objector. Once in the Army Reserve, how did you become a C.O.?

DELGADO: After advanced training, I became serious about Buddhism. I read translations of the Sutras. I became a vegetarian. Later, when I met Iraqi prisoners firsthand, I saw the people who were supposed to be our enemies. I did not feel any hatred for them. They were young, poor guys without an education, like us. They had to fight us. And our guys were the same; they had to fight them. And I said: "What am I doing here, fighting poor people?" I went to my commander, turned in my rifle, and said; "Look, I will stay in Iraq. I will finish my tour as a mechanic. I will do my job, but I am not going to kill anyone."

Q: You still served the whole tour in Iraq. How did your command respond to your request to become a C.O.?

DELGADO: As soon as I told them, they became hostile. They first took away my hard, ballistic plates that go into my vest. They said: "You are not going to fight, so you won't need body armor."

Q: The plates protect you from bullets and mortars. They are needed for safety, right? Were you still vulnerable?

DELGADO: Yes I was. They also took away my home leave, saying: "You won't come back." I was supposed to be promoted, but they said we can't promote you. The command tried a lot of things to get me to recant. I was ostracized. But the more they did to me, the more obstinate I became. I made trouble for my command. I didn't shave. I threatened to get my congressman involved. I called Buddhist organizations and the ACLU. They finally relented.

Q: I would like to review your observations. Your account does not focus on one or two bad individuals. Essentially, you are describing the brutality of a group, a collective loss of restraint, a complete breakdown of moral order within the military. I am sure that your Christian buddy, a typical American youth, would never shoot an unarmed person in private life. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr tells us that, with the sanction of the state, driven by nationalism, moral, decent individuals become killers and torturers in groups. You attribute the breakdown of restraint to racism. When did the process of dehumanization of Arabs begin? Did basic training influence the consciousness of our soldiers?

DELGADO: I went to Fort Knox for basic training. It was known to be harsher than other bases. The training was mentally taxing, and there was already some anti-Arab sentiment.

Q: Like what?

DELGADO: In the early stages I remember Army chants. We sang in cadences. And the chants had anti-Arab themes. Like burning turbans, killing ragheads, killing the Taliban.

Q: What did the chants say?

DELGADO: It was three years ago. I can't tell the exact words, but the sentiment was to burn turbans and kill ragheads. That was the phraseology. Our drill sergeants would give us motivational talks to pump up our fighting spirit. The theme was the need to get revenge, to go to the Middle East to fight Arabs.

Q: All this was before you even went to Iraq?

DELGADO: Yes. My own commander was infamous for anti-Arab speeches. Before we were deployed to the Middle East, he said, "Now don't go tell the media that you're going over there to kill some ragheads

and burn some turbans.” Everybody laughed, and he laughed with them. I remember standing there in formation, having grown up in Egypt. And I was thinking: “Oh, my God, this is going to be a disaster. Our commander has this anti-Arab attitude even before we go over.” The commander would give lectures about Islam. He said that Muslims advocate a holy war against us, that Islam promotes perpetual war. I’ve been surrounded by Muslims for a decade, exposed to their culture. He is wrong.

Q: In the 1980s the U.S. military made a lot of reforms. It is widely believed that racism in the military is now a thing of the past.

DELGADO: I have two answers. First, have we overcome racism in the sense that blacks and whites are banded together in the hatred of Arabs? That’s not progress. Second, we had an incident in our unit with a black specialist. He was a nice guy, really popular in the unit. There was no physical fight, but there was a dispute over him dating this white girl, having a relationship with a white girl. Two white guys took a piece of rope, tied a noose, and put a hangman’s noose on his bed. He found out who it was and went to his black sergeant. They went to the equal opportunity representative. The issue was effectively stifled.

Q: After your long ordeal, how do you feel about your country, and what do you want from the American people?

DELGADO: I still love my country. I love the idea of America. But I became disillusioned. Now I want to let the American people know what they’re signing on for when they say they support the war in Iraq. And I want Americans to recognize the racial undertones of the occupation and to understand the human costs of war.

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